EYES ON THE STARS - FEET IN THE MUD
JOHN 21:1-17
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Have you ever let yourself down? Have you ever failed to live up to your own expectations of yourself? Have you ever felt badly because there is such a large gap between the personal goals you have set - and the reality of what you are? Have you ever felt guilty because in your private moments you make plans to be better - to do better - at your job, your marriage, your parenting, your practice of Christian faith, but in spite of your grand schemes, your actual behavior always comes out about the same? Of course you have. So have I, and so has every person who ever lived.

The story is told of a minister who had driven to another town to preach a candidate sermon for a congregation where he hoped to become the pastor. When he arrived home his wife asked him how his sermon went. And he answered "which sermon do you mean? the one I prepared or the one I delivered from the pulpit or the one I preached in the car on the way home?"

We know how that feels. Most of us are caught between what we want to be and what we actually are.

I found a piece recently by an unknown author entitled: "Strange How I'm Made."

"Ii's strange how I'm made.
Half mystic and half nut.
My eyes upon the stars, my feet deep in the mud.
One moment I'm lying and the next I'd die for the truth!
One moment I'm kind, big-hearted, understanding, loyal;
The next sneaky and cruel.
It's wierd how a soul can be split up like that -
Part God, part scallywag.
It's inconvenient too,
Because you're never sure which part is on the job.
Just when you think you are all set to act the saint,
Something inside goes flop - and there you are

Anything but a saint!

Yet at other times, when you don't care how you behave,

Something in you leaps up like a flame,

All the muck in you is burned away

And for a flash, you're tall and clean and strong."

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That says it pretty well, I think. Eyes on the stars - feet in the mud. We live out our lives somewhere between our highest hopes - our noblest visions and the undramatic necessities of everyday life. Like Don Quixote, we want to see ourselves as knights in shining armor, but we know in our heart that the truth about us can be pretty shabby.

No one ever personified that human conflict more than Simon Peter. I find his story always intriguing - always helpful, because there is so much in it with which I can personally identify.

Our text this morning has to do with the third resurrection appearance of Jesus to his disciples in the Gospel according to John. But the story of Peter begins long before that. The portrait of the man in the Gospels is one that reveals physical strength, emotional warmth, a certain impetuousness that cause him to speak and act - and think about it later. This is no philosopher or theologican or scholar. Peter thought with his heart. And everything about him resulted in his assuming a kind of unofficial leadership over the other disciples. At Caesarea Phillipi, when Jesus asked the disciples who they though he was, it was Peter who blurted out - "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God"; and then proceeded immediately to demonstrate that he didn't understand what that high sounding title really meant.

At the last supper when Jesus was washing the disciples' feet it was Peter who protested - "Not me Lord - I will never let you wash my feet". And when Jesus said, "If I don't wash your feet you are not in fellowship with me", Peter, typically, responded, "not my feet only, but my hands and head

as well". This is no polite intellect: Peter isn't very good at symb olism and subtlety.

A little later, on the same occasion, Jesus announced that he would be betrayed by one of them. No one said a word - how could they? - but Peter, who whispered to John "Ask who it is he means."

And finally, when Jesus inferred that he would die soon, it was Peter - the brave protestor, talking from his heart who said: "Lord, where are you going?.. Why cannot I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you" To which Jesus responded, "before the cock crows you will have denied me three times."

In the garden, after the meal, when the soldiers came to arrest him, it was Peter who drew his sword and would gladly have died for his Lord on the spot. When the others slipped away into the darkness of Gethsemane after the arrest, it was Peter alone who followed, knowing the risks, yet unable to do otherwise..

And so it was Peter who found himself in a very precarious position, saying things he would forever regret. Jesus was taken into a building for questioning: Peter was outside, warming himself by the fire in the courtyard. hoping - we have to assume - to be inconspicious. But suddenly he was identified: "you are one of them." He wasn't prepared for that. An hour before he would have fought it out and died in the garden. That was the brave ideal. But now - suddenly - he found himself denying it. Three times during that long and agonyzing night the accusation came. And three times Peter denied knowing Jesus - the last time punctuating his denial with an obscenity. Never has the grandeur and cowardice of humanity been so clearly shown as in that brave, miserable mean, trying to follow his Lord and denying him every step of the way.

I've always imagined that as the soldiers brought Jesus out of the building their eyes must have met: Peter must have recalled Jesus' statement that he would do exactly what he had done. The next time he saw Jesus - he

was looking up to the cross.

All of that is necessary to understand the significance of what happened between Peter and Jesus in our New Testament Lesson this morning.

After the crucufixion, the fourth Gospel suggests that the disciples made their way back to Galilee, to their homes. Seven of them were still together, wondering, I suppose, what to do next. Peter suggested that they go fishing. The return to the boat, ropes, nets and hard work would be good therapy for troubled minds.

So they were 100 yards off shore in the early light of dawn when a voice broke through the silence - asking if they had caught anything, and advising them to try the other side of the boat. It wasn't an uncommon experience: shoals of fish are sometimes visible from shore in that misty light of dawn and fishing parties often left one of their number on the beach as a "spotter".

It was John who recognized him - and Peter who pulled on his tunic, plunged into the water and swam to shore. Nothing else must have mattered at that moment but the opportunity to set the record straight: to be with the one he had denied: to somehow make right the wrong he had done. A lesser man would have been afraid, embarrassed, hesitant - but not Peter.

So they ate breakfast together, and each shared a particular quilt. At the last meal they had deserted him. So the first word would have to be his. Their apologies - excuses - confessions - could not be said.

Thus begins a strange dialogue between Jesus and Peter - almost an interrogation. "Do you love me, Peter? YOu know, Lord, I love you". Three times: just as Peter had denied knowing Jesus so the plain, simple question came three times.

We are hindered in understanding this dialogue by the poverty of the English language. As you know there are several Greek words for love. And in this passage two of them are used. Jesus uses "Agape", intentional, devout, self-sacrificing love - in the first two questions. Peter answers with

"philia", affectionate,friendly love. The point is that they are two different words with two different meansing - and that gets lost when we use the single English term "love" to translate both.

An alternate, and perhaps better, rendering of the dialogue sounds like this: "Peter, do you love me more than all else?

Yes Lord, you know that I am your friend

Then feed my lambs.

Peter, do you love me?

Yes Lord, you know I am your friend.

Then tend my sheep.

Peter, are you my friend?

Peter was hurt that at the third asking he should have said, "Are you my friend?" "Lord", he said, "You know everything: you know I am your friend." (NEB-footnote to Jn.21: 15-17)

I conclude that what the author is saying is something very consistant with what we know about Peter's life. Namely, that devout, philosophic, intentional love was something alien to him. Peter's was a reactionary love, a love that came from the viscera - the heart instead of the mind. Perhaps he didn't even know what Jesus was getting at when he used the concept of agape love. All he knew that he was Jesus' friend: that Jesus had become something for him that no one had before: that even though he couldn't explain it intellectually, he knew his own heart.

I hear him saying: "Despite my weakness, my denial, despite my foolish boasting and my impulsive actions, despite all my faults, Lord, I do love you. You alone know how deep is my love, how far it can carry me. You alone know that my words and acts often fail to be as good as my intentions. You know that I have my eyes on the stars but my feet in the mud."

Peter learned that if he could stand in the presence of Jesus Christ it would be on the basis of Christ's love for him.- just as he was: [illegible]

certainly not on the basis of his own performance. Peter learned that even though he was guilty - he was acquitted: forgiven - but more than that really, loved - and made free - because in spite of his failure his Lord continued to have confidence in him. "Feed my sheep, Peter."

Peter, I think, heard the Gospel for the first time through that experience. He stood - where all of us must stand - with our failures, our denials, our hypocricies - in the face of our Lord. And he heard what we must hear - that even our denials don't condemn us. Our Lord loves us - and has confidence in us - and frees us to try and fail and try again.

There's an awfully lot in this story that is familiar to us. Psychologically, one of our major difficulties is living gracefully with the fact that we have not lived up to our own expectations of ourselves. We know what it means to intend one thing and do an altogether different thing.

There was an excellent television rendering of Leon Uris's novel QB VII last week, that told again the story of how basically decent, kind devout people ended up involved and implicated in the worst form of atrocities during the Second World War. They didn't intend for it to be that way. But the Doctor in QB VII did perform experimental operations on Jews in prisons in order to save his own skin. And before we condemn that too self-righteously we need to examine our own lives for the many ways our own words and deeds deny our noblest ideals and beliefs.

The trouble is - our moments of decision come with out warning. They sneak up on us with no lead time to prepare - just as Peter was surprised in the courtyard. A good friend and I were discussing how best to reflect our convictions about racism one time, and we concluded that one thing a man could do was not be silent in the face of a racial slur or innuendo. But we both confessed that we had failed many times - simply because racial slurs don't happen in calm discussion groups - but in the barber shop, on the street corner, on the run - right out of nowhere. And so, more often than not we join the uneasy laughter and then punish ourselves with guilt

afterward.

I was always a far better student,- as I thought about during the summer time - than I was in the reality of Constitutional Law 101. I am a far better husband and father as I think about it late at night than I am at 5:30 P.M. at dinner time. I'm a far better pastor in the quiet of my study than at any other time. I'm far more eloquent as I plan my strategies and speeches in the car than I am in the middle of a meeting. And I'm a better disciple of Jesus Christ in the abstract - than I ever am in relationship with other people.

One of Dietrick Bonhoeffer's poems from prison has always spoken to the dilemna as I have experienced it: Who Am I?

Who am I? They often tell me
I stepped from my cell's confinement
Calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
Like a squire from his country-house
Who am I? They often tell me
I used to speak to my warders
Freely and friendly and clearly
As though it were mine to command.
Who am I? They also tell me
I bore the days of misfortune
Equably, smilingly, proudly,
Like one accustomed to win.
Am I then really all that which other men tell of?
Or am I only what I myself know of myself?
Restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,
Struggling for breath, as though hands were compressing my throat,
Yearning for colors, for flowers, for the voice of birds,
Thirsting for words of kindness, for neighborliness,
Tossing in expectation of great events,

Powerlessly trembling for friends at infinite distance,
Weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,
Faint, and ready to say farewell to it all?
Who am I? This or the other?
Am I one person today and tomorrow another?
Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,
And before myself a contemptibly woebegone weakling?
Or is something within me still like a beaten army,
Fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?
Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am Thine!
(Prisoner for God, P.221)

Peter failed to be what he wanted to be. So do you and so do I. Even when it appears that we are being noble, courageous, honest, generous, we know better - and we know that God knows better. We can feel badly about that - we can wallow in our own guilt and inadequacy and end up lowering our sights. If our feet are going to continually get stuck in the mud, then we might as well focus our eyes on the mud as well.

Or we can hear that best of all news that came to Peter: that good news that we are not condemned for failing: that it is worth the price we pay in terms of anxiety and frustration to keep our eyes on the stars: to keep trying - stretching, growing - setting new and better goals, falling down and then getting up to try again.

Peter learned the best and hardest lesson of all - The Grace of Jesus Christ - the Love of God - the freedom to live openly and honestly and joyfully because we are loved with a love that is infinitely patient and always confident about us.

The anonymous prose with which I began concludes - appropriately

"So God, I'm glad you made me as I am.....
Mystic and mutt, philosopher and fool.

My eyes up on the stars, my feet depp in the mud.
For I have learned that flawed lives can serve you well.
I have found that both stars and mud are swell." AMEN

Thank you father, for a love big enough to encompass our failures. Thank you for a love graceful enough to include our denials. Thank you for the freedom to live - confidently. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN